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LOUISVILLE, HORSE RACING COMMUNITY REMEMBERS JOHN ASHER

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (Tuesday, Aug. 28, 2018) – Thousands of people have shared their memories of **John Asher**, an iconic and beloved member of the Churchill Downs family and Louisville community, who passed away suddenly Monday morning after suffering a heart attack while on vacation with his family in Florida. He was 62.

An irreplaceable ambassador for Churchill Downs and the Kentucky Derby, Asher joined Churchill Downs, home of the world-famous Kentucky Derby, in January 1997, and he served as vice president of Racing Communications since March 1999.

Plans for a memorial service that could occur as early as next week will be finalized in the coming days, according to his wife Dee Asher.

Below are a few of the countless memories shared about the legendary John Asher:

Trainer Tom Amoss: “It’s awful news. It speaks volumes that he truly knew and liked everyone.”

Jockey Agent Ron Anderson (agent to Joel Rosario): “No one had more enthusiasm for horse racing and for the Derby than this gentleman.”

Hall of Fame Trainer Steve Asmussen: “So sad. He was an incredible human being – praying for his loved ones.”

Assistant trainer Baldemar Bahena (assistant to Dale Romans): “I knew him for years – back when he and (Churchill Downs morning line odds maker and retired track announcer) Mike Battaglia used to work together. I was always happy when I saw him lose so much weight. He worked really hard to do that. I’d always see him running around the neighborhood and it would make me happy to see his progress. It’s unbelievable to see him gone.”

Hall of Fame trainer Bob Baffert: “John was the warm human face of Churchill Downs. I was always happy to see him. He was as Kentucky as the Derby, bluegrass, bourbon and hot browns. I can’t imagine Derby week without him.”

Morning line odds maker and retired track announcer Mike Battaglia: “I’m heartsick to hear about the passing of my good friend John Asher. My deepest condolences go out to Dee and all of his family. John was loved by many and will be deeply missed.”

Trainer Buff Bradley: “You can’t have another person like that. He knew everyone. You don’t meet people like that who get to know everyone.”

Trainer Pat Byrne: “Way back in the day when I was in the hay day of my career, John would come back with a 1950s looking tape recorder and microphone to interview me for WHAS. He was always so kind. You can’t replace a guy like that.”

Jockey Agent Doug Bredar (agent to Florent Geroux): “When my wife (racing analyst Caton Bredar) and I got the news of John’s passing when we were driving back from Saratoga Monday we were shocked and stunned. John always held himself with class and dignity. Back when I was racing secretary at Churchill Downs I was doing so much research to revamp the stakes program and create the Stars of Tomorrow cards. I wanted to make sure all the names of the stakes races were accurate and I wasn’t leaving out a major horse. It was incredibly gratifying when John put his stamp of approval on the names. The racing world lost one of the great ones Monday.”

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Assistant trainer David Carroll (assistant to Mark Casse): “I knew him way back in the day when he would come around with a tape recorder. When he got his job on the frontside, he never changed. He was just as nice and caring with that job. He understood what we did back here and continued to fight for us and what was best for racing.”

Trainer Norm Casse: “John Asher was the only person I knew that loved Louisville, Churchill Downs and the Kentucky Derby more than me. He was Churchill Downs and the Kentucky Derby and they will never be the same. I have looked up to him my entire life and I will miss him dearly.”

Bellarmino University Basketball Head Coach Scott Davenport: “John Asher did what all extraordinary people do, he made others better. There are many great people all over the world. John was truly extraordinary because through incredible preparation and attention to detail, he made others better. Our world has lost a true superstar.”

Hall of Fame jockey Pat Day: “John was a great guy – a sweet, sweet guy and dear friend. He helped me out a number of different times and situations. He was always affable and always upbeat and always a joy to be around. If you ever had any questions about the Kentucky Derby, you’d call John. He was a walking encyclopedia. What a great guy. It really took the wind out of my sails.”

Journalist Jody Demling: “My heart is broken. I just can’t believe we lost such a fixture in our community, such an amazing person and such a good friend in John Asher. He was literally one of the nicest, most gracious people you will ever meet. He loved family and he loved Churchill Downs.”

Louisville Mayor Greg Fischer: “So heartbroken. The world knows John Asher as the voice of Thoroughbred racing and its No. 1 fan – and he was the best. I also know him as a strong community leader fighting for those who have little. I will so miss his presence at Churchill Downs and the streets and boardrooms of Louisville where his total humanity shone like a brilliant first Saturday in May. Rest in peace, brother.”

Churchill Downs President Kevin Flanery: “To say that racing has lost one of its giants with the passing of John Asher does not begin to capture the impact this man has had and will continue to have on the Churchill Downs family. His passion for the Kentucky Derby, horseracing, his WKU Hilltoppers, great music, and above all else his loving family was genuine and infectious. Racing has lost an icon. I, and many others, have lost a kind and generous friend. We will miss John’s laugh, his unmistakable voice, and his unique storytelling. Our hearts and prayers are with his wife Dee, his daughters Heather, Erin and Emma and his grandsons, Cameron and Caden.”

Retired journalist Steve Haskin: “We not only lost John Asher, we lost a living, breathing part of the Kentucky Derby – its voice, its presence and its spirit. It’s hard to think of the Derby without him. Condolences to his family.”

Trainer Neil Howard: “It’s so sad. My wife and I got to know John when we first moved to Kentucky and he was always so kind and nice to us. Some things are just simply tough to comprehend and this is one of them.”

Journalist Tim Layden (Sports Illustrated): “It’s incredibly sad that John Asher is gone. He was as cheerful and kind and upbeat as anyone I’ve been around in four decades as a journalist. A good, sweet man and with a radio baritone you could never unhear.”

Trainer Michelle Lovell: “He interviewed me a couple of times and I couldn’t believe how nice he was. He truly cared about everyone on the backstretch even if he barely knew them, like me.”

U.S. Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY): “I was saddened to hear the passing of John Asher. As a legendary voice in Kentucky’s Thoroughbred racing community, I got to know John during my many visits to Churchill Downs. His enthusiasm and knowledge of the storied race track and the Kentucky Derby was impressive. Elaine and I send our condolences to his wife, Dee, and his family, and to all of those who knew and loved him. John will be sorely missed.”

Hall of Fame trainer Shug McGaughey: “John was an irreplaceable guy. Nothing meant more to him than the Kentucky Derby, the Churchill Downs community, the Louisville community and the racing community throughout. Racing is going to miss John nationally because he was a fixture there, a great liaison between the frontside of Churchill Downs and the backside of Churchill Downs. Nobody loved the Kentucky Derby any more than he did. He was a statue for what racing and the Kentucky Derby meant. He’ll be sorely missed.”

Journalist Marty McGee: “There are no words for what a great guy he was. This is how much John loved horse racing and the Derby. He was seven times named by The Associated Press as the best (radio) reporter in Kentucky. He could have been the main guy on the biggest station in Louisville at WHAS; he could have had one of the main slots on a drive show. But he said, ‘You know what? I love Churchill Downs. I love the Derby. I can’t stand it anymore; I’ve got to go to work for them.’ And he went to work for Churchill in January of ’97. He was just a joyful face of racing, and was great and everything you’d want from somebody who could convey that love for racing the way he did.”

Journalist Paul Miles (WHAS Radio): “On my first day at WHAS Radio in 1992, John pulled me aside and told me were going out on a story. This rookie reporter was terrified. We ended up at a Chinese buffet in downtown Louisville. Of course, he picked up the tab.”

Trainer Graham Motion: “Rest in peace John Asher. You always went out of your way to be kind and courteous. The Kentucky Derby won’t be quite the same without you.”

Louisville Football Head Coach Bobby Petrino: “He was a great guy, great man. He’ll be really missed.”

Radio Broadcaster Paul Rogers (WHAS Radio): “Everyone should embrace their job with the passion John Asher did his. Except with John it wasn’t a job. It was what he truly loved to do. And he was loved by so many. Condolences to his family – we will all miss him.”

Trainer Dale Romans: “The one thing I’ll always remember about John is he’d stop by after every Derby and say, ‘You know there’s one with your name on it in the future.’ He is one of the major reasons I still believe that’s the case. He always had the confidence in me and it meant the world.”

Trainer Chuck Simon: “John was just a great person. When I first started training in Kentucky I didn’t know that many people and used to hang out with (late track announcer) Luke Krutbosch who was my friend from Arizona. Back then, Luke was stationed near the old Press Box and Gold Room for the big players and John was always around. He always took the time to come over and talk to me every time he saw me and ask how my horses were and if I had anything that he could include in a press release – knowing that free press is a godsend for a new trainer starting out. He barely knew me yet he was trying to help me out.

So a few years later I had a horse named Pirate King that John liked. The horse was working really well and even though it was the weeks leading to Derby, which for John was Christmas, every time the horse worked John would email me the clocker’s sheet for the day with a little note, ‘make sure you let me know when he runs, I want to bet a few bucks.’

I don’t think he was a big betting man really but for some reason he took a liking to this horse. So, I enter the horse for opening day of the CD spring meet which of course is the weekend before the Derby. John sees me on the backstretch the day before and says, ‘Well, is he ready?’

I said, ‘He’s pretty live, John. You’ve seen the works.’ So he says good luck, see you in the winner’s circle. The horse gallops at 20-1 and the first thing I think of is John probably laughing as the horse crossed the wire. So, we go in the winner’s circle and I don’t see him. After the race I text him and he doesn’t answer. So, I figure he must be busy as it is Derby Week and he is swamped. The next day he comes to the barn and gives me this sheepish look. I said, ‘You didn’t bet him, did you?’ He said all morning I was thinking I have to remember to get a bet in on Pirate King and then I got tied up in a press conference then there was some emergency then the governor’s office called then I got called into the meeting.

John said he heard Luke say over the loud speaker, ‘Pirate King still going strong.’ He said, ‘Damn I knew that horse was gonna win.’ But, he was happy that he won even though he didn’t get a bet down at 20-1. He was a great guy who loved the Derby and loved Churchill Downs and loved Western Kentucky sports and loved his family more than anything. Few people I ever met were as naturally kind as John Asher was. It’s hard to believe that both Luke and John are both gone.”

Track Announcer Travis Stone: “I will never forget one particular time John Asher called me: It was a cold, rainy December evening. I was in New York City changing trains. He said, ‘How do you feel about moving to Kentucky?’ From a personal and career perspective, a more significant phone call I will never receive. Perhaps it’s selfish of me to say this now, but I hope I shared with him how much that call and his subsequent visits, texts and calls helped me to feel welcome not only at Churchill Downs, but Louisville as well. If not, his passing reminds me of my responsibility to do the same for others. You never really knew when John was dealing with life’s inevitable challenges. It was always so many days until the next Derby, where it was sure to be 70 and sunny. How’s that for an outlook on life? His ambassadorship for our sport, Churchill Downs, the Kentucky Derby, Louisville and lessons on living life the right way will be sorely missed.”

Trainer Tom Van Berg: “Such heartbreaking news. He was such an amazing person and a treasure to the city of Louisville and Churchill Downs. He will truly be missed. I’m having trouble comprehending what it will be like without John around. The Derby will never be the same.”

Representative (D-KY 3rd District) John Yarmouth: “Incredibly saddened by the passing of John Asher. He brought such joy to so many and I’m proud to have called him a friend. He added so much to the world of horse racing and had such a tremendous love for our city and its traditions. I join all of Louisville in mourning the passing of this great man, and send my deepest condolences to his wife and children.”

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